ABSTRACT: This report provides the Committee with an update on progress made in respect of Housing and Council Tax Benefit Take Up

1. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee note the contents of this report.

2. BACKGROUND

Report No. 1216/08, Proposed Strategy for the Take Up of Housing and Council Tax Benefits was approved by the Corporate Services Committee on 4 December 2008.

The Take Up Strategy explained how the Revenues and Benefits Service proposed to tackle the under claiming of housing and council tax benefits by building on existing good practice and partnership working as well as implementing new targeted initiatives.

This report included a Take Up action plan which set out a number of actions aimed at improving HB/CTB take up. The majority of actions have been taken forward with positive results. After review and further consideration of likely costs and benefits a few actions have not been taken forward such as bus and radio advertising campaigns.

A summary of the extensive work which has been carried out to date is described in the following section of this report.

3. HOW WE ARE MAXIMISING BENEFIT TAKE UP

In accordance with the Take Up Strategy a number of initiatives and new procedures have been implemented to maximise housing and council tax benefits (HB/CTB) take up as follows:

- a range of publicity material has been produced and distributed to potential applicants and other stakeholders
- additional information and improved links have been added to the benefits section of the Council’s website
- articles promoting the take up of benefits have been published in Angus Matters and the Housing division’s newsletter as well as a Housing Association newsletter
- joint working is taking place with the Housing division to ensure that all new council tenants with a potential eligibility for HB/CTB apply at the start of their tenancy, with liaison arrangements to ensure all incomplete claims are followed up effectively
- joint working is taking place with Housing Associations to ensure that all new tenants with a potential eligibility for HB/CTB apply at the start of their tenancy
- joint exercises have been carried out with the Department for Work and Pensions, (DWP) Pension Service, to identify persons of pension age with potential council tax benefit entitlement
- housing benefit awareness training has been delivered to Housing rent arrears and visiting staff, Tenancy Support staff and Housing Association staff
- awareness training has been delivered to all Revenues and Benefits staff not involved in HB/CTB administration so that at every point of contact with a customer the potential for benefit entitlement is considered and promoted where appropriate
- improvements have been made to application forms for HB/CTB
- a targeted, pro-active campaign has been carried out to identify and encourage take up from persons potentially affected by a change to the rules regarding child benefit.
This meant that some persons who previously did not qualify for HB/CTB because of excess income might now be entitled under the more generous rules. Work was done to identify these cases and invite applications from the persons affected:

- the integration of the assessment of free school meals and school clothing grants with housing and council tax benefit processing

4. OUTCOMES OF TAKE UP WORK

Almost 60% of claims for HB/CTB are made direct to the DWP at the same time as a claim for a state benefit such as Job Seekers Allowance, Income Support or Pension Credit. In these cases the DWP passes the HB/CTB claim to the council for processing and payment. The remaining 40% of claims are made direct to the council.

To measure the level of success of take up initiatives, monitoring arrangements have been put in place to identify those new claims made direct to Angus Council which have resulted from take up intervention.

Monitoring of the source of new claims made direct to Angus Council has been carried out since August 2009. The results of this analysis for the period from August 2009 to December 2010 is summarised below as follows:

- 3142 new claims were received direct by the Revenues and Benefits service during the period from 1 August 2009 to 31 December 2010
- 279 of the direct claims received were from persons of pension age and the remaining 2863 were from working age applicants
- 27% (853 claims) have been identified as being generated by take up initiatives
- as a result additional Housing Benefit of £35,045 per week has been paid which equates to £1,822,342 per year
- as a result additional Council Tax Benefit of £6,165 per week has been awarded which equates to £320,588 per year
- 50% (429) of these new claims were generated by Revenues and Benefits staff prompting customers to apply
- 33% (283) of these new claims were generated by the arrangements in place with the Housing division either at tenancy sign up or at a rent arrears visit
- the remaining 17% (141) were generated by a number of initiatives such as mail shots, promotional material, website etc.

The above analysis highlights the success of initiatives such as the liaison arrangements which are in place with the Housing division and the increased awareness of staff as a result of targeted take up training.

The additional HB/CTB paid as a result of take up work increases the income available to low income families which in turn helps to decrease hardship and debt and has a beneficial effect on the Angus economy. As HB/CTB generally attracts a full 100% subsidy from the Department for Work and Pensions, generating this additional income for the Angus community comes at no direct cost to the Council.

5. GENERAL INCREASE IN HB/CTB CASELOAD

The overall HB/CTB caseload has increased considerably over the past two years. Whilst the greater part of this increase in persons in receipt of HB/CTB is likely to be attributed to the economic downturn and increasing unemployment our efforts to promote take up have also contributed to the overall increase.
To highlight the large increase in the numbers of persons in receipt of HB/CTB the following table details the position at November 2008 compared with that at December 2010.

**Pension Age Claims – Numbers of persons in receipt of Housing and / or Council Tax Benefit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim Type</th>
<th>Position at end of November 2008</th>
<th>Position at end of December 2010</th>
<th>Percentage +/-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both HB and CTB</td>
<td>3493</td>
<td>3437</td>
<td>-1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTB only</td>
<td>2040</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB only</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>+31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>5629</td>
<td>5580</td>
<td>-0.87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that although there has been a slight decrease over the last two years in the pension age caseload this is against a backdrop of steady increases in pension age cases in previous years.

**Working Age Claims – Numbers of persons in receipt of Housing and / or Council Tax Benefit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim Type</th>
<th>Position at end of November 2008</th>
<th>Position at end of December 2010</th>
<th>Percentage +/-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both HB and CTB</td>
<td>3391</td>
<td>4107</td>
<td>+21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTB only</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>+26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB only</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>+53.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>4212</td>
<td>5267</td>
<td>+25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**All Claims – Numbers of persons in receipt of Housing and / or Council Tax Benefit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim Type</th>
<th>Position at end of November 2008</th>
<th>Position at end of December 2010</th>
<th>Percentage +/-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both HB and CTB</td>
<td>6884</td>
<td>7544</td>
<td>+9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTB only</td>
<td>2421</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>+3.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB only</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>+49.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>9841</td>
<td>10847</td>
<td>+10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that this additional workload had been accommodated without any increase in staffing resource, at a time when Revenues and Benefits staff have taken on the additional work associated with assessment of free school meals and school clothing grants and have been successful in their efforts to improve HB/CTB processing times.

**ONGOING ARRANGEMENTS**

The Revenues and Benefits service will continue to promote the take up of HB/CTB at every opportunity, working in partnership with other council services and external agencies. The focus of this work will be on the initiatives which have been the most successful in generating successful applications for HB/CTB.
The Welfare Reform changes announced by the Westminster government will potentially impact on take up work but further detail is required before a meaningful assessment of this can be made.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Housing and Council Tax Benefit expenditure is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Subsidy funding is received for 100% of normal expenditure, but certain types of expenditure such as overpaid housing and council tax benefit, attract lower levels of subsidy. This means that the vast majority of any increase in Housing and Council Tax Benefits expenditure arising from an increase in take up of these benefits will be fully funded from UK government resources and the impact on Council resources is therefore negligible.

The DWP do not provide specific funding for benefit take up work; however the modest expenditure of approximately £2,100 incurred to date has been accommodated within the existing revenue budget of the Finance Division. Ongoing take up work will be accomplished in the same manner. The increased workload arising from the increase in HB/CTB caseload has been absorbed by the Revenues and Benefits service without any increase in staff resource.

6. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

There are no Human Rights implications arising from this report.

7. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

The issues dealt with in this report have been the subject of consideration from an equalities perspective. An equalities impact assessment is not required.

8. The Chief Executive, the Head of Law and Administration, the Director of Neighbourhood Services, the Head of Housing and the Head of Finance have been consulted in the preparation of this Report.

9. CONCLUSION

The Revenues and Benefits Service working collaboratively with internal and external partners has successfully maximised the take up of Housing and Council Tax Benefits.

COLIN MCMAHON
DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

NOTE: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.